CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY

Learning Development Office
2492 West Broadway
Tel.: 482-0320 locals 397/695

TEACHING AND LEARNING

Volume 10, Number 4
April 1984

by: Ron Smith

CREDIT FOR LEARNING

Learning can occur in many different ways and places. Very few professors would be so presumptuous as to think that their classrooms or courses are the only places that students can acquire knowledge and skill. In this newsletter I want to raise some issues concerning how we recognize learning: Do we give any credit for learning that has occurred prior to our own courses? How do we measure learning that occurs during our courses? To what extent do we make efforts to assess learning that occurs across an entire program of study?

BEFORE ADMISSION TO THE UNIVERSITY (PRIOR LEARNING I)

How do we recognize or acknowledge the learning that might have occurred prior to application for admission to the university? Imagine the following woman, in her midsixties, applying to Concordia to work towards a degree.

> "She has never been to college, but she brings with her a list of experiences, a thick portfolio of reflections written about these experiences, and a collection of commendations on her numerous social contributions. From the list, it becomes evident that she has taught at a private girls' school, helped found a reform school for boys, served as a delegate for her nation to an international organization, aided in the drafting of an important international covenant, spent countless hours visiting wounded servicemen, acted as an official in the ambulance corps, traveled extensively with intensive purpose - visiting the disadvantaged, the ill-housed, and the poor; looking into working conditions in the mines and living conditions in mental hospitals - and then turned her efforts to remedy the conditions she had observed, and delivered over 1000 lectures on a variety of topics. As evidence of her reflection on these activities, she provides you with three published books and copies of several years of syndicated daily columns in newspapers across the nation." (Keeton, 1976)

We would probably admit her as a mature student into the Faculty of Arts and Science and require 108 credits for a Bachelor's degree. This woman, Eleanor Roosevelt, has received 35 honorary degrees, but not one earned degree beyond high school. Would we be honoured to have her teach courses at Concordia, but still require her to take extra courses before even admitting her to one of our degree programs?

She may be an exceptional case, but how many of our students come to our university having acquired knowledge through work or study outside of the formal school system? We seem to be able to recognize the value of work experience after one has enrolled (for example, co-op programs and internships), but refuse to even consider the value of work before admission to a program.

The assessment of prior learning is obviously not an easy task; but rather a necessary one if we are to treat our students with justice and fairness, utilizing our human resources to their full potential. It seems reasonable that the measurement of learning should not be affected by the process of acquiring it. At the conclusion of this article there are references to some recent research articles in this area.

BEFORE OUR COURSES (PRIOR LEARNING II)

Many of us may be ready to dismiss the issue of credit for learning prior to admission as too complicated, or one for some special committee to handle. The issue of how we assess an individual's learning prior to our own courses is one we should not ignore. Quite often faculty can be heard commenting on how little some students seem to have learned in previous courses (they can't read, they can't write, they can't think); quite rare are comments about how much some students seem to know.

Previous learning or entering knowledge has a substantial effect on the learning that occurs in our courses. Some form of assessment of the particular areas of weakness in our students' entering knowledge and skill could lead to appropriate remediation steps which might increase the amount of learning in our course. Some form of assessment of particular areas of strength could lead to modifications in the course design which would utilize the contributions of those individuals with prior experience and knowledge for the benefit of the whole class. Some flexibility in the design of our courses would allow every individual to build on their own knowledge base to get the maximum possible benefit out of our courses.

Both of these areas of assessing student learning, prior to their admission to the university and at the beginning of our courses, emphasize an aspect of the professors' role which is often considered the least pleasant. Professors are eager to teach, but they are reluctant to evaluate. It seems unlikely that they are so naive as to believe that learning advanced calculus, history, or art cannot occur outside their classrooms. Perhaps it is that the assessment of learning is already difficult, and that it becomes even more difficult when you have to test or measure something you have not taught in

your course. Some people are more cynical and suggest that if we start giving credit for prior learning students will not have to show up for classes or courses, only for tests. Will we be out of a job?

IN OUR COURSES (CURRENT LEARNING)

Measuring and crediting prior learning is problematic, but how well do we measure the learning that occurs in our own classes? Are we satisfied with our tests and exams as measures of how much our students are learning? In 1957 Dressel described the grade as "an inadequate report of an inaccurate judgment by a biased and variable judge of the extent to which a student has attained an undefined level of mastery of an unknown proportion of an indefinite material." Is that description still accurate today?

How can we measure how much learning has occurred in our courses? If we really want to measure how much learning has occurred as a result of our efforts and those of our students, we need to have accurate measures of where they were at the beginning of the course and where they are at the end. The difference would be some measurement of change or learning, a measure of the "value-added." Very few of us even pretend to do that.

The tests we give only measure the student's status with respect to a particular content on a particular day. This would bear some relationship to how much was learned if we could be assured that all the students started at the same place - a highly unlikely situation given the diversity in our current student population.

Can we accept test results or grades that only describe how much a given group of students know on the day of the test? (We do not want to worry here about how long that knowledge is retained.) This approach might be satisfactory if it were not confounded by several other factors. Can we report grades which indicate that everyone in our class has mastered the subject (too many As) or that no one has learned enough (too many Fs)? Do our grades sometimes reflect a desire to motivate students by giving them an encouraging grade? Is there a tendency to try to grade (or rather to test) so that marks come out normally distributed? At best these grades only indicate relative standing within one group. Could an "average" student in a very good year fail a course, but lead the class in a very poor year? Comparing these grades between institutions, faculties, departments, or even individual professors, may become almost meaningless.

There are alternatives to the traditional "norm referenced" testing (grading on a curve). They are not as easy, but they are being developed and implemented at different institutions. "Criterion referenced" measurement tries to indicate the desired outcomes in terms of knowledge, skills, or abilities and then to develop criteria or standards to measure their attainment. "Contract learning" establishes learning plans for individual students or groups of students and specifies the outcomes as well as the ways of measuring their achievement. In both cases the final grades describe the level of achievement of specified outcomes. In-

formation on each of these alternatives is available from the Learning Development Office.

These two approaches offer solutions to some of the problems that plague higher education. With diverse student populations now coming to university it is sometimes difficult to "maintain standards." Both of these approaches require the clear statement of goals and standards. With these in place it is possible to require a certain level of attainment for an A, B, or C. These standards can be more easily communicated to students and to other professors. They also make it easier to plan curriculum which responds to individual needs. In addition, students can adjust their efforts in relationship to their learning needs and the level of knowledge they require.

I have been discussing alternative approaches to the traditional model of grading. There is also a considerable literature available on improving traditional testing practices (multiple choice tests, essay exams).

ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

There might be less cause for concern if we had reason to believe that the current grading system at least indicated who would be "successful" after university, or if we had data that the whole curriculum produced the type of "educated person" that we propose as our goal. The ongoing debate about a "core curriculum" suggests some considerable concern about this second point.

But first, what about students' performance after university? Chickering (1983) in an article on Grades quotes Harvard's David McLelland, who, after reviewing the literature reports: "Researchers have had great difficulty demonstrating that grades in school are related to any other behaviors of importance other than doing well on aptitude tests. Yet the general public - including many psychologists and most college officials - simply has been unable to believe or accept this fact. It seems so self-evident to educators that those who do well in their classes must go on to do better in life that they systematically have disregarded evidence to the contrary that has been accumulating for some time.

"In the early 1950s a committee of the Social Science Research Council looked into this matter and concluded that while grade level attained seemed related to future measures of success in life, performance within grade was related only slightly. In other words, being a high school or college graduate gave one a credential that opened up certain higher level jobs, but the poorer students in high school or college did as well in life as the top students. . .

"Such outcomes have been documented carefully by researchers both in Britain and in the United States. Berg summarized studies showing that neither amount of education nor grades in school are related to success as a factory worker, bank teller, or air traffic controller. Even for highly intellectual jobs like scientific researcher, Taylor, Smith and Ghiselin have shown that superior performance is related in no way to better grades in college: the average college grade for the top third in research success was 2.73,

and for the bottom third, 2.69."

Chickering does not find these results surprising when each institution and every professor establishes their own norms for performance, when their criteria are not clearly articulated, when the grades are in relation to others in a class, and when they are averaged across all types of courses and curricula. But I have already mentioned some of these problems and proposed some approaches to solutions.

Finally, are we producing students who are educated, who can communicate orally and in writing, who can analyze and evaluate? Often it is argued that these are skills that are acquired across all the courses in the curriculum, hence they are not the responsibility of any individual course or professor. As a result we seldom try to assess their attainment. Our institutions are criticized by society (see the numerous reports on the quality of schools) for not producing the right types of graduates.

Until recently there did not seem to be any acceptable ways of trying to measure the outcomes of university education. However, the American College Testing Program has developed some promising tests as part of their College Outcome Measures Project. McBer and Associates have produced tests for thematic analysis and the analysis of arguments. Assessment centers suggest that they are able to identify general management or leadership skills and potential. Alverno College has an entire liberal arts curriculum based on a competency model.

I do not want to suggest that these are perfect measures but rather that efforts are being made to measure learning outcomes across an entire curriculum.

In this newsletter I have tried to suggest learning occurs before people come to the university or to our classes, it occurs while they are in our courses, and it occurs across all the courses in the curriculum. I have argued that we do not recognize or reward (credit) learning that occurs before students arrive in our classes, that we do a poor job of describing and measuring the learning that occurs in our classes, and that we have barely begun to even consider measuring the general outcomes of education.

The following articles and books (available in the Learning Development Office) suggest ways we might begin to give credit for all learning, prior to our courses, during our courses, and across the entire curriculum.

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COMP Prospectus. The American College Testing Program 1982-83.

Experience and Learning: An Introduction to Experiential Learning. Arthur W. Chickering, 1977, Change Magazine.

Grades: One More Tilt at the Windmill. Arthur W. Chickering, 1983, AAHE Bullitin.

Teacher Made Tests. (2nd Edition). John A. Green, 1975, Harper & Row.

Experiential Learning. Morris T. Keeton & Associates, 1976, Jossey-Bass.

Assessing Prior Learning - A CAEL Handbook. Joan Knapp, 1977, Cooperative Assessment of Experiential Learning.

The Testing and Grading of Students. Ohmer Milton & John W. Edgerly, 1976, Change Magazine.

Will That be On the Final. Ohmer Milton, 1982, Charles C. Thomas.

Grading Teaching and Learning; Module 7 Bruce M. Shore, 1978, McGill.

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UPCOMING WORKSHOPS

May 7th
Introduction to Micro Computers

May 7/11/18/25
Wordprocessing for Faculty Members

Early May
Computers for Departmental Chairpersons

May 23/24/25
A Theory of Action Approach to Improving Instructional Effectiveness

June 5th
Kolb and Career Development

June 6th
Career Development and the Department Chairperson

June 7th and 8th
Faculty Career Development

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For further information contact the Learning Development Office at local 397 or 695.